**The Dragon Boat Festival**

According to the Chinese traditional calendar, Duanwu jíe—known in English as the Dragon Boat Festival—takes place on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month.

Chinese festivals are usually associated with special foods as well as fun (“heat and noise”). On this festival Chinese people prepare and eat zongzi, and the excitement is provided by dragon boat racing—hence the English name for the holiday. To understand the Dragon Boat Festival, and most things Chinese, you have to know a little ancient history.

Legend has it that the festival commemorates the life and especially the death of Qu Yuan (c. 340-278 B.C.), the first great poet in Chinese history. He lived during the Warring States period (a time when China was divided into several kingdoms) and was a high-ranking official in the state of Chu. At that time his homeland was under siege by another powerful state called Qin. The king of Chu did not recognize Qu Yuan’s correct stand or appreciate his suggestions for saving their country. What is more, treacherous officials slandered him, and at last he was sent into exile. On the fifth day of the fifth lunar month, when he heard news that the capital of Chu had fallen into enemy hands, he threw himself into the Miluo River (in present-day Hunan province) and drowned.

What is the connection between Qu Yuan and dragon boats? Qu Yuan, a great patriot, was loved by the people. When villagers heard he had thrown himself into the river, they rushed in their boats to try to save him, but they were too late. Dragon boat races commemorate their rescue attempt.

If you happen to visit southern China around the time of this festival and are in a town with a river, you will surely have the chance to see some magnificent racing. Along the riverbanks on houses projecting over the water hundreds of people, both locals and tourists, wait for the races to begin. The boats themselves are long and narrow, with a colorful dragon’s head high up on the bow. Each one holds at least fourteen people, all dressed in gorgeous ancient costumes. The man standing at the front of the boat with a small flag in his hand is the captain; the one standing at the back is the drummer, who beats a big drum to mark the rhythm for the oarsmen to follow. With the bang of the starting gun the dragon boats rush forward like flying arrows, amid the loud banging of drums and shouts from the onlookers. It’s an unforgettable scene.

But what do zongzi have to do with all this? Legend has it that when Qu Yuan drowned, his body was never found. People felt very sad and worried that his body would be eaten by the creatures in the river. So they threw packets of rice into the river to feed the hungry animals and asked them to eat the rice instead of Qu Yuan’s body. Those packets were zongzi. Another legend says that the people offered zongzi as sacrifices to the soul of Qu Yuan. To prevent the food from being eaten by animals, they wound it with brightly colored thread, which they believed would scare away dragons and other aquatic beasts. Nowadays you can see at the festival markets beautiful model zongzi made of paper and covered with colorful silk thread.

Today people all over the country eat zongzi on the Dragon Boat Festival. Here’s how you make them:

First get some bamboo leaves—a special kind about two palms long and about three to four fingers wide. Soak them in water, and clean them with soft brushes. They will serve as the wrappers for the zongzi.

In the meantime, soak glutinous rice in cold water for several hours. When the rice becomes fat, it’s time to make zongzi. Take two or three bamboo leaves, overlapping the edges to form a funnel. Put glutinous rice inside, wrap it up in the shape of a pyramid, and tie it with a string. Boil them in a deep pot for hours, until the rice is cooked. This kind is called “plain” (bai) zongzi, which you eat with sugar or honey. The Beijing style has rehydrated dried dates inside. In southern China people like to put bean paste or pork soaked in soy sauce in the middle of the rice.

Another custom of the festival is to wear xiangbao, “chinese perfume pouches” made of colorful cotton or silk embroidered with small animals, plants, or flowers. The inside contains a kind of perfume to ward off poisonous creatures such as scorpions. But nowadays many people, especially children, like them just as beautiful festival decorations.